

Planning laws do favour travellers, says minister

PLANNING laws are deliberately biased in favour of gipsies and travellers, a Government minister has finally admitted.

After years of official denials on the issue, Communities Secretary Shahid Malik confessed that travelling families are treated differently from 'the settled community'.

Justifying the policy, the minister said: 'Fairness does not mean treating people equally; it means addressing the different needs of different people'.

Mr Malik's confession has been hailed by campaigners as a 'long-awaited admission of the truth' which they say reveals the way planning laws are weighted in favour of gipsies and travellers.

And it explains why many, if not most, local campaigns against unauthorised or proposed encampments are doomed to failure, no matter how justified the objections may be.

Mr Malik made his comment during a little-noticed parliamentary debate last month.

Liberal Democrat MP Steve Webb told the minister that his Gloucestershire constituents were furious that gipsies

By Dan Newling

had been allowed to camp on protected Green Belt land that had previously been turned down for residential housing.

Mr Webb claimed that 'planning anarchy' had set in whereby travelling people deliberately flout planning law in the knowledge that local councils - which are under Government pressure to find more caravan sites - would eventually rule in their favour.

The MP said: 'There is a feeling among those who have contacted me that people do not have equal rights and responsibilities, but that there are separate rules and outcomes for different groups.'

The system, claimed Mr Webb, is making his constituents resentful.

Mr Malik replied: 'Fairness is what the Department for Communities and Local Government - my department - and the Government are all about; but fairness does not mean treating people equally; it means addressing the different needs of different people.'

'The need to provide adequate sites for gipsies and travellers is a challenging one for local authorities, but that is just one of the many challenges that authorities regularly deal with.' The Chambers

English Dictionary defines fairness as 'honesty, impartiality, justice'.

Mr Malik's apparent redefinition of the word stems from the Government's decision in 2000 to classify gipsies and Irish travellers as distinct racial groups under the Race Relations Act.

This decision - coupled with changes to planning law and a desire to build many more per-

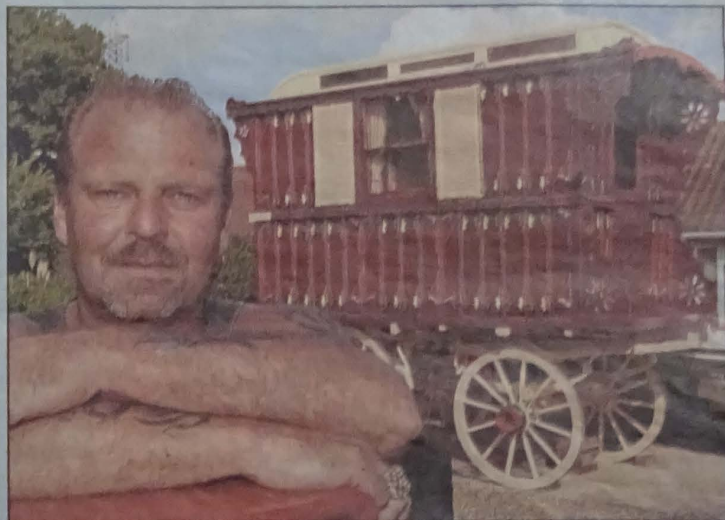
'Special treatment'

manent gipsy and traveller sites - conferred extra rights upon these groups under both race relations and human rights legislation.

In 2005, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister issued council planners with a so-called 'good practice guide' telling them how to deal with gipsy and traveller camps.

The guide says: 'Some planners... think that "treating everyone the same" helps to ensure equality. But this is not the case. Explicit recognition of difference is needed to ensure that the right action can be taken to deliver a planning service responsive to different needs within the communities it serves'.

Critics say this means that in any planning battle, an argument between a 'settled' family and their traveller neighbours is a dispute not between equals, but two groups with



Permission granted: John Leveridge said he wanted to return to his travelling ways

One rule for the farmer, another for the Romany

ALL George Frost, the owner of three not particularly productive fields in Norfolk, wanted was a place where he could shelter from the rain and make a cup of tea.

So he asked his local council for permission to put a caravan on his land on the outskirts of the village of Carleton Rode. Not one of the 727 villagers objected.

Unfortunately for him, however, his fields were in a 'protected area' under the local development plan, and his application was rejected.

Last year Mr Frost, now retired, sold the fields to John Leveridge, who applied to put six mobile homes and two touring caravans on the site. At last week's packed planning

meeting of South Norfolk Council, 175 local people objected.

But Mr Leveridge is a Romany gypsy. And even though he has lived for 11 years in a bungalow nearby, he told the meeting that he wanted to return to his traditional travelling ways.

South Norfolk planning officer Chris Trétt said that according to Government targets, there is an 'inadequate' supply of pitches for gipsies in the area, and councillors were warned that discrimination against gipsies and Irish travellers is unlawful.

So although the fields remain protected Mr Leveridge's application was passed by the council.

different legal rights and privileges.

In June, the Daily Mail revealed that the number of legal gipsy and traveller sites has quadrupled to 1,279 over the past ten years.

Over the same period, illegal sites more than doubled to 3,680. Some illegal sites are thrown up over a Bank Holiday weekend, when council plan-

ning enforcement officers are away from their desks. By the time they return, it is too late to do anything about the encampments.

Conservative local government spokesman Bob Neill said: 'It's not fair that planning applications are treated differently purely because of the type of person who is applying - the same, consistent rules

should apply whatever your background.'

'Under Labour, law-abiding families who work hard and pay their taxes face reams of red tape to extend their houses, whilst travellers are given special treatment to concrete over the Green Belt and defy planning rules.'

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'Half of best pension schemes to close'

By Olinka Koster

HALF of Britain's companies will have closed their generous defined benefit pension schemes to existing members within three years, a study suggests.

Three-quarters of firms operating such schemes, which include final salary pensions, have already shut them to new staff. Only 9 per cent have so far closed them to existing employees.

However, a study by consultants Watson Wyatt found that 50 per cent believe they will be in this position by 2012.

The report will stoke further fears over the extent of Britain's pensions crisis after almost all blue-chip companies admitted earlier this year that their final

salary schemes are unsustainable. It confirms that private sector workers face a bleak future, with dozens of generous company schemes on the verge of being wound up.

Watson Wyatt said that if its prediction of many more closures is borne out, around one million people saving for retirement through a defined benefit scheme will be forced to join an alternative, less generous, one.

In a further blow to workers it found that of those companies which have already closed their schemes to new

entrants, 28 per cent expect to keep their defined benefit scheme open to existing members, but on less generous terms.

A quarter did not expect to make any changes, but this includes 16 per cent who have already made their schemes less generous. The number of schemes still open to new joiners is expected to dwindle to just 2 per cent by 2012.

Watson Wyatt surveyed more than 250 employers about their pension plans.

Final salary schemes have run into trouble because a growing number of employers say they cost too much. Falling share prices have hit the assets of many schemes, forcing employers to prop them up.